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# **A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ART FORMS IN NDEBELE AND IGBO WALL PAINTINGS**

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## **Abstract**

*African art is a kaleidoscope of many expressions. There are traces of it in every aspect of the people's culture which include their beliefs, behaviors, practices as well as their material items. All the expressions combine to define the African way of life. Similar expressions are found in African architecture where wall painting is done to shelters that people live in, shelters that are dedicated to their royalty and also to shelters where they worship their gods. This paper reports a study that sought to put into context the significance of wall painting as a form of African art. Descriptions of wall painting from various African societies are first presented before a comparative analysis of the art forms in the wall paintings of the Ndebele of South Africa and the Igbo of southern Nigeria is done. This is in an effort to demonstrate the socio-cultural significance of African wall art.*

**Key Words:** *Wall Painting, wall art, art forms.*

## **Introduction**

**The practice of traditional art in Africa is not a hobby; it is a way of life of the people of the continent. The worldview of the African people, with all of its consequences, is deeply ingrained in their diverse artistic expression. African art is an integral component of the culture of its people. Whilst Macionis and Plummer (2005) define culture as 'the values, beliefs, behavior, practices, and material things that define a people's way of life,' it is difficult, in the Africa sense, to separate art from culture. Culture is said to be 'the art of the people', as the 'art of the people' is expressed in their culture. This is because the people on the African continent, on a daily basis, lead a life that is heavily influenced by the art they find and interact with everywhere. Visona *et al* (2001) affirm by stating that Africa is described by the visual force and ingenuity of its art as it is a continent with stunning cultural richness of outstanding variety. This is evident in the cosmology, language, architecture, religion, dance, rituals, textiles and fashion of the African people.**

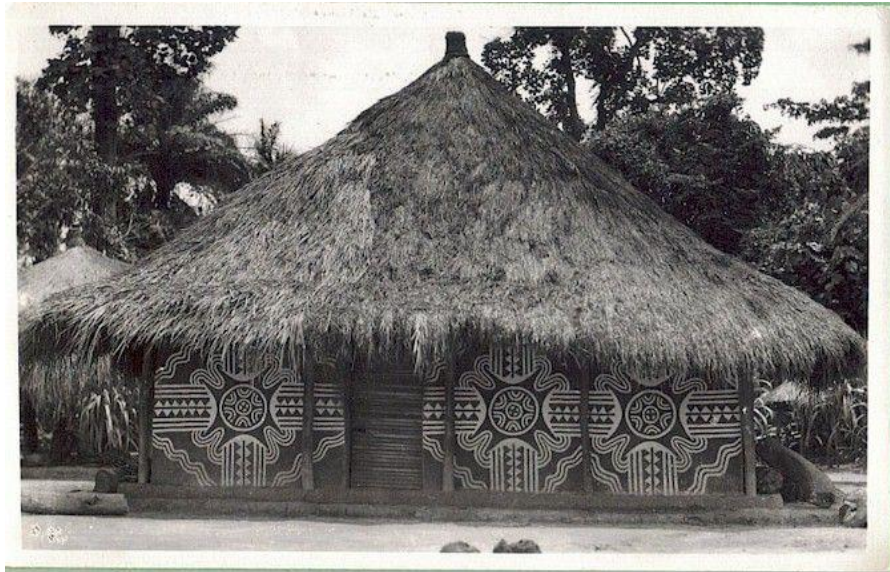
**Africa's art is categorized as being either two or three-dimensional. Wall painting, the focus of this article, is a two-dimensional art as it is produced on flat surfaces such as the walls of secular dwellings, royal palaces, and religious worship sites. Vansina (1984) while supporting the point that wall painting is rendered in two-dimension, further argues that it can be referred to as a graphic art because it requires the creation of greater illusion of space, texture, and atmosphere than three-dimensional arts, aspects that are easily achieved with the application of graphic art techniques.**

**Early humans made wall paintings (called rock art) in caves where they resided with incredible ingenuity and power (Clottes, 2016). Gillon (1991) writes that neolithic man made tens of thousands of stunning paintings and engraving on the rock walls of their caves not only to retain and recount their activities in their society but also for fun and for magical purposes. Brain (1980) agrees and notes that whereas rock painting was used for purposes like sympathetic magic, art for art's sake and cosmology, wall painting of the traditional architecture (like houses, palaces, and religious worship places) was mostly done for socio-aesthetic reasons that include beautification.**

**After the shift away from residing in caves, wall paintings are today evident on walls of man-made buildings around the continent. The goal of African architecture today isn't only for providing shelter for humans and storing treasures, but also for showcasing the people's artistic abilities. Though the architectural features of African design are, in most instances, works of art in their own right, wall paintings are often executed on surfaces where they may connect with the public and be enjoyed by everyone. African architecture is therefore decorated and ornamented with geometric patterns in low relief made out of various materials. Not all wall paintings are permanent however. Those that are temporary are refreshed regularly, particularly in preparation for a specific event. The inside of the buildings are themselves embellished with ceremonial artifacts, carved furniture and wooden utensils.**

**Since wall paintings are found across Africa, the following are descriptions of some from different communities on the continent.**

**a) Mangbetu wall painting: Figure and geometric murals were painted on the walls of houses and other places by the Mangbetu people of Congo. Visual language and symbolism are reflected in the Mangbetu wall paintings. Their designs are complex and extremely specialized (Figure 1).**



***Figure 1. Mangbetu wall painting from Congo.***

***Source: <https://www.pinterest.es/pin/300122762648846103/>***

**b) Ekoi wall painting: The Ekoi live along the Cross River in Nigeria. Ekoi wall paintings are commonly found on the walls of the people's club houses. Their club houses are similar in nature to the Igbo club houses. As seen in Figure 2, the mud paintings are usually painted in multiple colours and have esoteric symbols drawn on them.**



**Figure 2. Ekoi wall Painting with esoteric symbols from Cross River, Nigeria. Photograph by: Herbert M. Cole, 1973**

**c) Yoruba shrine painting: Yoruba shrine painting is a spiritual art form found across Yoruba land. The anthropomorphic and zoomorphic objects associated with the gods of the Yoruba are shown on the walls of Yoruba shrines (Figure 3). White, red and green and the most common colours used.**



**Figure 3. Yoruba Sacred Painting for Ogun (god of Iron) from Ilesa, Osun State, Nigeria. Source: Stewart Baker  
<https://slideplayer.com/slide/14953083/>**



**Sirigu wall painting: Wall paintings are created by the Sirigu people who live in the Upper East region of Ghana. These paintings are made out of natural materials and feature narratives that depict various cultural symbolism using animals such as snakes, crocodiles, cows, and other animals. The primary purpose of these paintings is to satisfy cultural needs (Figure 4).**



***Figure 4. Sirigu wall painting from Ghana***

***Source: <https://www.travelblog.org/Photos/7601147>***

**This paper purposes to do a comparative analysis of two distinct forms of African wall painting- the art forms in the wall paintings of the Ndebele of South Africa and the Igbo of southern Nigeria. The comparison will cover the history, functions, forms and motifs, materials, and forms of production of the wall paintings.**

## **Methodology**

**This study applied a desk research design. This is research design based on secondary sources and involves setting the objectives of the research, collating and summarizing the data required before analyzing and synthesizing it to draw the required conclusions. Desk research was chosen because it provided information needed to**



understand the art forms in the wall paintings of the Ndebele of South Africa and the Igbo of southern Nigeria.

## **Ndebele Wall Painting**

### *History of the Ndebele of South Africa*

The Ndebele are part of the Nguni ethnic group of South Africa. Until the early 1900s, the Nguni people, regarded as ferocious warriors and landowners, occupied a huge portion of southern Africa (Laloti, *et al*, 2001). Their ruler, King Mampuru, was a fierce opponent of white colonization in the area. Boyd, (2017) writes that because of this resistance, the ruling Boers declared a formal declaration of war against the Ndebele people in 1883. The Ndebele homes were demolished, and the whole tribal territory taken over by the Boers. King Mampuru was arrested and hung. The Ndebele lost the war that resulted in their long suffering. The citizen's sadness and suffering were shown in emotive art that expressed cultural opposition at the hands of the Boers. This emotive art was painted on Ndebele mud-walled homes (Figure 5) by the women in the society (Frescura, 2011).



**Figure 5: A typical Ndebele Wall Painting.**

**Source:** <http://afaithfulattempt.blogspot.com/2012/02/ndebele-african-animal-drawings.html>

### ***Functions of Ndebele Wall paintings***

The Ndebele used the expressive paintings as a form of communication amongst themselves. The wall paintings comprise colorful symbols and sentiments that portray personal prayers, self-identification, values, emotions, and marriage. In many cases, the paintings were done to commemorate male initiation, which is referred to as *wela*. Frescura (2011) writes that the paintings on the walls have remained secular as they have never been utilized for any kind of spiritual expression.

As indicated earlier, the artists who made the wall art on the houses of the Ndebele were women (Figure 6). Ndebele women were responsible for painting the outside gates, front walls, sides and the inside of her house as well. The women were responsible for passing on the tradition and style of wall painting from one generation to the next. It was believed that a woman who takes time to beautifully paint her house was also a devoted wife and mother.



***Figure 6. A Ndebele woman wall painter at work.  
Source: [www.academic.evergreen.edu](http://www.academic.evergreen.edu)***

The wall paintings of the Ndebele are also an indication of a women's fertility. Normally it is customary for the Ndebele to wait for two years after the birth of a woman's first child to begin construction on a homestead and its subsequent decoration. A woman's fertility also makes her husband a member of the Community Council of Men and has a voice in the public affairs of the group.

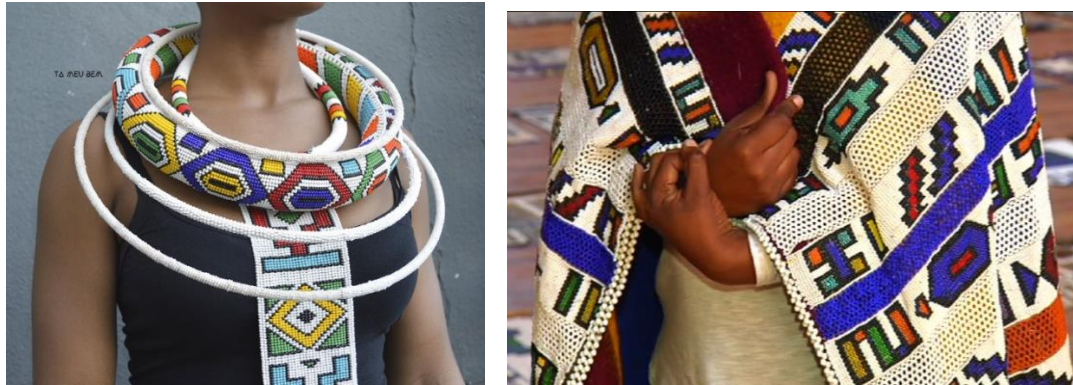
Wall painting amongst the Ndebele also indicated the time of transition in the life of a woman. Such time included the marriage of a daughter or the period when her son attends initiation school. The wall paintings in essence therefore presented the status of the woman in the community, such as being a mother, head of the homestead, and a responsible adult.

Ndlovu (2020) writes that what has changed over time with the decoration of the homes is the style in which the wall art is done. Artists have begun to incorporate imagery from their lives, particularly the details drawn from their work as domestic servants in white households in the cities. They now incorporate electric lights, swimming pools, multi-storey buildings, telephones, airplanes, and water taps in their paintings as these reflect present-day happenings.

### ***Forms and motifs of Ndebele wall art***

The patterns of the Ndebele wall paintings were one of the most important aspects of the art as the Ndebele used the patterns to communicate through painting. Most of the patterns in the Ndebele wall paintings were linear with different shapes of simple triangles.

The triangles were usually painted with colour. The symbols and patterns were often based on Ndebele's beadwork patterns, an essential part of the Ndebele ancient cultural heritage (Figure 7).



**Figure 7. Ndebele beadwork designs that inspire their wallart**  
Sources: [www.tameubem.com](http://www.tameubem.com) and [www.enca.com](http://www.enca.com) respectively

The communicative patterns in the Ndebele wall paintings are usually repeated throughout the design with only a slight variation in the choice of colour. The geometric patterns and shapes are first drawn out with a black outline before being filled in with colour. The patterns are then grouped together to cover all the walls of the building.



**Figure 8. Detail of Ndebele wall painting.**  
Source: [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com)



### ***Process of production of Ndebele Wall painting***

Prior to the start of the painting, the entire wall surface was painted white using limestone whitewash. The whole wall was then divided into sectors with each sector filled in with contrasting finger-paint patterns.

The designs were painted in by the women using their fingers. They scooped the fingers in wet plaster that had been made using cow dung. A wide range of marks, squiggles, zigzags, and straight lines were then drawn on the walls. Natural colours like browns, blacks, and other ochers were then added in the wet plaster and painted on the walls. The result are beautiful works of art as seen in Figure 8.



***Figure 8. Ndebele's house with wide range of marks***  
***Source: <https://www.stocksy.com/18612/ndebele-woman-painting-her-house-south-africa>***

The patterns and symbols on Ndebele wall paintings today are rendered with a rich black outline and vivid colours. A total of five main colors are used. These are: red and dark red, yellow to gold, sky blue, green, and pink. White colour is always used as the background colour because it makes the bright patterns stand out more.

Another change in the practice today has to do with the tools of trade. It has become necessary to design specialized tools that can paint large geometric forms of flat colours quickly and extremely tiny brushes that can paint small areas and outlines. The solution to this has been the importation of new tools which have allowed more complex designs to be painted.

## **Uli Wall Painting of the Igbo of Southern Nigeria**

### *History of the Igbo of Southern Nigeria*

Like many ethnic African societies, the actual origin of the Igbo people is shrouded in mystery and mythology. Archaeological discoveries and records indicate that the early Igbo first migrated from the Niger-Benue confluence and the territory between Awake and Oulu, approximately 4,000-5,000 years ago. At the time they were hunters and food gatherers though they later turned into farming as they developed social institutions, specialized in crafts and practiced religious beliefs. (Smith, 2010).

During the ninth-century, bronze castings were discovered at Igbo-Ukwu, a town located near the city of Awka in the Nigerian state of Anambra. With this, the ancestors of present-day Igbo are known to be renowned makers of the most inventive and technically accomplished bronzes. Other remarkable finds at Igbo-Ukwu include

decorative pottery, glass beads, copper figurines and animal head pendants which by all contemporary standards remain among the most technically advanced artifacts found south of the Sahara (Cole and Aniakor, 1984).

Uli are the curvilinear traditional designs of the Igbo people. Uli painting tradition is as old as the history of the Igbo people. It comprises both body and wall art. It is not clear which between the two arts came first but what is certain is that body decoration gained prominence as wall painting flourished. Uli art is a practice that is rooted in the people's cultural beliefs.

#### *Functions of Uli Art*

Igbo painters devoted their efforts to advance the community philosophy of their people. The wall paintings were intended to be used for community or village rituals, weddings, and other important life events. Uli art was made on walls of private homes, compound walls, and community shrines.



**Figure 9: A typical Uli wall painting. Source: [www.onepageafrica.com](http://www.onepageafrica.com)**



Traditional Igbo women were exponents in the wall painting (Adepegba, 1995). Uli art was commissioned by patrons who would be lauded when the work is done instead of the artist who would be given none of the attention. The artist was instead be referred to by the term '*omena*,' a muted show of regard of her talent (*nka*) (Kabir, 2018).

Young girls and women emulated the skills and techniques of Uli painting from their mothers, grandparents or other women who lived in the neighborhood in which they grew up. Once a woman achieved the mastery of Uli painting, she was commissioned to present her artwork in variety of social contexts, including in the marriage process, the celebration of changing seasons and in funerals and memorials of the deceased.

#### ***Forms and motifs of Uli art***

The *Uli* artist drew forms and symbols that completely depended on her personal interpretation. *Uli* symbols, whether on the body or surface of walls, are known by a variety of names, depending on the region they were used. This notwithstanding, it is still possible to evaluate the degree of creativity and skill the Uli artist has from her finished work.

Uli artists conceived their designs from the environment. They were influenced by the forms and intricate patterns of objects found in nature. Nnadozie (2006) affirms that most of Uli art motifs are derived (or abstracted) from natural phenomena that includes plants, animals, the cosmos as well as man-made objects and are all combined to make one composition.

### ***Process of production of Uli Wall painting***

**Uli art is a communal affair done by many women at a time (Figure 10). The painting involves the use of several colours. The patterns were drawn big and asymmetrically placed in the composition. This was to create additional attention.**

**Pigments used in painting Uli art were found in riverbeds or eroded gullies caused by heavy rains and flooding. Their exposed soils could easily be dug and then ground into an applicable paste or slip which was then applied to already prepared walls by the artist. Women can also today buy coloured pigments that are on sale in local village and community markets.**



***Figure 10. Communal Uli wall artists painting a wall  
Source: [www.onepageafrica.com](http://www.onepageafrica.com)***

**The wall paintings are created during the dry season and because artists do not add binder to their pigments, the paintings generally**

wash or wear off during the subsequent rainy season. A repeat of the process has to therefore be done the rainy season (Norley, Bodjawah, & Kissiedu, 2019).

## **Comparison of Ndebele and Uli Wall painting**

From the presented text, it is worthwhile to note that though Ndebele and Uli wall paintings share a lot in common they also have marked differences. Their peculiarities are what makes each art form unique. Some of the similarities drawn from the discussion are presented below.

Ndebele and Uli wall paintings are both carried out by women. This is done on the walls of their dwelling shelters and homes. Both art forms are cultural expressions that were started in the two communities a long time ago.

In both cases, Ndebele and Uli wall paintings influence the status of the artist in the community. The artist social standing is held high owing to their talent in making the art. In both communities, apprenticeship is the method of transfer of art skills from the older generation to the younger one.

There are marked differences in the two art forms. While Ndebele wall art is a product of grief that was suffered by the people in the hands of their enemies, Uli art forms are purely an expression of cultural beliefs and values. Another difference is that Uli wall painting is often carried out communally as it is a cooperative effort (Figure 5) while Ndebele wall painting is a single person effort.

**Another contrast between Uli and Ndebele wall painting is that Uli wall art is curvilinear as it does not show the use of regular lines whereas Ndebele wall painting is linear and geometric. Ndebele art is also usually done using bright colours and has large angular patterns while Uli wall art is monochromatic in nature.**

**The sources of inspiration of both form of art are different: Symbols of Ndebele wall painting are influenced by the patterns of their bead design tradition while Uli wall painting is derived from the patterns of their body decoration. Records have also shown that Ndebele art is not used to edify religion as it is only carried out in homes while Uli wall art is done on both homes and community religious houses like shrines.**

## **Conclusion**

**The paper focused on an important tradition of art in Africa- wall painting. Discussion also drew a relationship between African culture and art and argued how wall painting stems from the aspect of its architecture. Examples of wall art were highlighted with general characteristics of the art form presented and a comparative study of Ndebele and Ibo painting done to justify the socio-cultural importance of the art on the African continent.**

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